

THE MONARCH: *DANAUS PLEXIPPUS* LINN.  
IN ENGLAND, 1981

199

By ANTHONY ARCHER-LOCK\*

Early in the last week of September 1981, a depression crossed the Atlantic rapidly, tracking north-east across Wales and Northern England, accompanied by very strong circulatory winds. By the 26th of the month, sightings in the Isles of Scilly area, of American Wigeon and other species from that continent, were accompanied by reports of not less than five Monarch butterflies, the tally rapidly rising to nine, although one can never discount duplication. Another was seen by a friend, Mr. Robert Burridge, to land on the cruise liner "Cambera", 80 miles west of these Islands.

September 27th brought reports of one Monarch seen fluttering briefly around Michaelmas Daisies at Kingsbridge, in South Devon, and the same observer found another at Slapton Ley, a little further up the coast. This butterfly was exhausted, and was captured, transported to Plymouth, revived on buddleia, shown to numerous admirers, and finally put on show with food in a case at Plymouth Museum where it died shortly afterwards. The specimen was in good condition structurally.

On this same date, a Monarch was watched late in the afternoon by several observers, all lamenting the lack of their cameras, fluttering and basking amongst bracken in a sheltered spot between high lime stone out crops at Prawle Point, between Kingsbridge and Slapton Ley, and some fifty metres inshore. This butterfly several times walked over a bracken frond to hang, wings closed, upon the underside, but eventually flew off. The condition was excellent.

Monday, September 28th was a bright, sunny, but very breezy day. Upon my arrival at 12.30 p.m. the information was that no Monarchs had been seen. There remained one Red-eyed Vireo (a Warbler) from America, which had conveniently set up residence in the little car park for the past two days, attracting a prodigious number of tripods and telescopes without losing any sense of modesty!

Urged on by previous experience which many will have shared, I set out along the coast, eyes on stalks. After less than half a mile of walking, I watched a Monarch rise from a clump of Mayweed in a cabbage field. Following some moments of aerial hesitation, the butterfly flapped away with a casual air, low across the field, revealing a beautiful fox colouring of reddish-brown, veined and bordered in black. Again, a specimen in excellent condition. The butterfly turned and floated towards me with the breeze, wings held half aloft, before dropping below the cliff line. Twenty minutes later, apparently the same insect re-appeared on a similar route, ignoring the flowers this time, and still keeping very low as if to minimise the fairly strong wind, although never deflected by it.

\*4 Glenwood Road, Mannamead, Plymouth, Devon PL3 5NH.

Two hours passed before a further sighting was gained, this time coming up the coast with the wind, dropping lazily over the hedge into the field where once more there was a brief sense of indecision. The Monarch then rose over my head, affording a truly magnificent view of all the markings against a brilliant blue sky before again dropping over the low cliff, and making straight towards the glistening sea where yachts fought the elements, and great ships plied the horizon.

Walking back along the foot of the inner bluff, I flushed a Monarch which flew over the bracken against the rising wind, and apparently dropped into the growth. At this stage, a passer-by told me that while eating his lunch on the village green a mile away, a Monarch, travelling at speed, had almost flown into his face – this had been at the same time as my first sighting. Soon after leaving me, he had two good views of a Monarch exactly where the first one had been found and watched for two hours on the previous afternoon. Had this butterfly returned to roost one wondered, or had it been there for over twenty four hours.

Strangly, only one land record had been reported for Cornwall, at Nare Head, but Dorset was more fortunate with three coastal reports. One of these was in a private garden where the Monarch remained on michaelmas daisies for half an hour. By comparison with my just passable flying shots, this observer, until then mildly interested in butterflies, gained some magnificent pictures, and is now dedicated!

If these Monarchs came over in the eye of the storm, they must have left the centre of the low at some stage, but it would seem more probable that they were caught up in the northerly winds and swept round to the south of the low travelling eastwards. The observations certainly suggest that the South Devon butterflies reached land close to the points where they were seen. Prawle Point, with its white coastguard station above a see-through cave, is a prominent landmark offering a hint of shelter beyond, and well known as a dropping-in point for migrant birds. At this time, the Red Admirals on some clumps of ivy were in near swarming numbers, while Clouded Yellows and Y moths were also present. The majesty of the Milkweed made them all appear midgets. One more point of interest was that the white spotting, including the normally yellowish large spots towards the outer tips of the forewings, was all very prominent, a possible clue to origin.

Dr. Jeremy Thomas, and Messrs. E. Griffiths and V. Tucker kindly provided some of this information.

#### Postscript

One specimen was captured at Ilfracombe and another seen in the area of Barnstaple, both in North Devon. One was noted at St. Austell in South Cornwall which however, could possibly have been the Nare Head record, having travelled further eastwards along the coast.

A further butterfly was watched by Mr. I. Hamilton at Slapton Ley on October 6th – this conceivably was the same one which

I described as flying seawards late during the afternoon at Prawle Point on September 28th.

At Prawle Point, there was atrocious weather throughout September 29th and 30th which must have prevented any movement, but many observers have failed to gain any sightings since. This rather suggests that any remaining specimens perished. By contrast, in the Isles of Scilly, some specimens remained for many days, three in particular being reported as favouring a certain lane verged by some American nectar-bearing flowers; here, the butterflies were to be seen flying to and fro quite frequently. Finally, on October 13th near St. Mary's Airport, Isles of Scilly, a Mr. John Randell watched a Monarch clinging to a pine tree where it was imbibing resin. Several observers have since told me that this group of Monterey pines became a roost for the Monarchs, where they took up hanging positions, but embarked on flights during bright days. [This suggests similar behaviour to that of the butterfly in Central America, and it would be interesting to hear of any reports of it being seen in the Scilly Isles the following spring. — Editor.]

**THE MILKWEED BUTTERFLY (MONARCH): DANAUS PLEXIPPUS L. AND OTHER MIGRANTS IN CORNWALL IN 1981.**—The Milkweed butterfly was seen at Nanclēdra, near Penzance, on September 25. It was feeding on the flowers of wild fuschia. This was reported to me by Mr. E. M. R. Stimpson, of Ludgvan. The weather has been bad in Cornwall recently, with several storm-force S-SW gales, perhaps indicating an unaided Atlantic crossing?

The Silver Y, *Autographa gamma* L. has been conspicuous by its absence so far. I have seen one Pearly Underwing, *Peridroma saucia* Hbn., and two Dark Swordgrass, *Agrotis ipsilon* Hufn. One of the latter came to m.v.l. on April 10, the other on August 29. About ten Painted Ladies, *Cynthia cardui* L. and a single female Clouded Yellow, *Colias croceus* Geoff. were seen at Penhale near here on August 29.

Since writing the above, there have been various other sightings of the Milkweed in September 1981, details of which have been passed on to me. One or two may have been duplicated, but having taken these into account the following list is probably accurate.

25th: Kynance. Mr. & Mrs. Merrifield.

26th: St. Levan, Nr. Land's End. Mr. Garceau.

27th: Mylor Harbour. ?Mr. Hillier.

28th: Nr. Gorran Haven. Miss Dunn.

Kennack, The Lizard. Miss Crompton.

Loe Pool, Nr. Porthleven.

30th: Duchy Nurseries, Lostwithiel.

?exact date: Ashton, Nr. Helston. Mr. Fairbrass.

?exact date: Scilly Isles. Five reported, whether all were different insects is difficult to ascertain. These evidently coincided with several exciting ornithological rarities.

Flowers noted on which some of these were feeding were montbretia, clover, buddleia and hydrangea. I am grateful to Mrs.